

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Essay Contest – 2000

Second Prize: Jodi Minehan, Issaquah Middle School

“Free at Last, Free at Last, Thank God Almighty, I’m Free at Last!” Those are the words inscribed on Martin Luther King’s monument. And even though he was laid to rest over 31 years ago, I believe that would still be his wish for all people as we enter a new millennium.

Martin Luther King, Jr. spent his lifetime working for equal and full rights of the poor, disadvantaged, and racially oppressed. He became one of the most famous leaders in American history because he led people from all walks of life to protest racial discrimination, poverty, and war. Violence and hatred took his life at a young age of 39.

As a minister of a Baptist Church in Alabama, a husband, and father, he was chosen to lead the Montgomery Improvement Association, formed by the black community to lead a boycott of the segregated city buses. During the boycott, his home was bombed, but he persuaded his followers to remain nonviolent despite threats. Later the U.S. Supreme Court desegregated the buses and he believed this gave Black people a new sense of dignity and destiny. He continued his campaign and was awarded the Nobel peace prize in 1964 for his efforts in uniting people and finding peaceful solutions to racial oppression. He opposed the Vietnam War because he felt the money and effort spent on war should be used to fight hunger and discrimination in our own country.

Martin Luther King gave his famous “I Have a Dream” speech at the Lincoln Memorial. His wish was for all people to be created equal. As we enter the new millennium, his words need to be once again spoken throughout our country. He was right when he said, “Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.” It is my belief that his legacy of peace and justice needs to begin within families. Parents need to teach and model for their children peaceful ways of solving disputes and accepting differences of individuals. This will only be done when parents take the time to converse with and read to their children. Parents need to teach their children to interact with all kinds of people and see the beauty in each individual and emphasize strengths rather than weaknesses. Neighborhoods have to be filled with children playing games and laughing together despite the color of their skin or the content of their character. Neighborhoods have to be filled with families working together on community service projects. Parents have to be given more time off work to be with their children. Businesses need to be less competitive and more family-minded. In other words, there needs to be less greed. Streets have to be safe places for all. Schools need to put a bit less emphasis on academics and more emphasis on teaching and practicing with children traits like honesty, problem-solving, responsibility, thought-filled decision making, and appreciating differences. Schools need to be smaller and give all students the chance to be shine, be leaders, and feel special. Businesses need to give individuals time off work to help schools. The media needs to publish more than a list of schools’ test scores in their papers. They need to focus more on the good that is happening daily in schools. The media gives too much coverage to the negative. And finally, the leaders in our churches, cities, states, and nations need to model these traits. All this takes energetic personalities and hard working qualities like Martin Luther King, Jr. possessed and modeled. However, if this truly happens, our world will be faced with less anger and hatred that causes oppression and war.

A national holiday in honor of Martin Luther King, Jr. is observed on the third Monday in January. That holiday always falls a day or two before or after my birthday. As an

adopted Korean-American, I value his words and dreams. They are important to me because his message of equality and anti-racism remind me of his challenge to my generation and me to spread kindness and justice in our families, schools, businesses, neighborhoods, churches, cities, states, and nations. As my generation learns about diversity, I think more about Martin Luther King, Jr. and his teachings. Even though he spoke his words long before I was born, they still have a strong message to me. The message is that all humans have a heart and deserve to be treated with respect, equality, and dignity. "Free at last, Free at Last." Don't we wish we could say, "Thank God Almighty, We're Free at Last?"

References

Reddick, Lawrence. 1972. World Book Encyclopedia. Field Enterprises Educational Corporation